

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

September 25, 2007

■ VALLEY & STATE online print edition



I-10 widening held up by funding feud

Jessica Coomes

The Arizona Republic

Sept. 22, 2007 12:00 AM

SEDONA - Figuring out who should pay to speed up the Interstate 10 widening through the southwest Valley is the only thing holding up the state from starting construction.

The Arizona Department of Transportation had planned to break ground this year, but that's not feasible now, spokesman Matt Burdick said. Best-case scenario, ADOT will start early next year.

The State Board of Transportation on Friday postponed a vote on funding that is needed to accelerate the project. Board members will meet again within 15 days, after they get a legal opinion from the Arizona Attorney General's Office. At issue is how to allocate \$10 million the Legislature set aside to help three southwest Valley cities speed up the freeway expansion by four years.

Meanwhile, the three cities - Avondale, Litchfield Park and Goodyear - are at odds over how much each should contribute. Avondale and Litchfield Park think Goodyear should pitch in about three-quarters of the costs, but Goodyear agreed to pay for just more than half.

"We want this information fast. We want to make a decision fast," Joe Lane, chairman of the Transportation Board, said at the meeting at Sedona City Hall. "We're not trying to slow anything down."

But even if the board had made its decision Friday, the three cities would have to find a compromise before the project can get started.

"I'm sorry there's a delay of 15 days, but quite frankly, there's 15 days of work to be done by the cities to get an agreement put together," Litchfield Park Mayor Tom Schoaf said.

Goodyear Mayor Jim Cavanaugh said he hopes the board can meet sooner than 15 days.

"I'm really disappointed, less than in the money situation than in the delay," he said after the meeting. "The people need this road widened without a delay. Even a 15-day delay is unacceptable."

Before the Transportation Board decided to push back its vote, members suggested how to disburse the \$10 million the Legislature set aside.

Board member Felipe Zubia said the three cities should get the full \$10 million. That would go against a Maricopa Association of Governments decision to give the cities \$7 million and require Avondale, Litchfield Park and Goodyear to pick up the rest, which amounts to about \$2.7 million.

As an alternative, board member Delbert Householder suggested the transportation board follow MAG's recommendation to award the cities \$7 million. But he wanted to specify how the cities should split up the \$2.7 million under an arrangement to favor Goodyear.

"I don't know that it's appropriate for the state board to tell the cities what the cities have to agree to pay," Schoaf said later. "The cities need to work it out ourselves."

Meanwhile, board member Bill Feldmeier said the panel should look into spreading the \$10 million across the state instead of keeping it only for the West Valley project.

State Sen. Robert Blendu, R-Litchfield Park, told the board the \$10 million was intended to reimburse the cities for the interest acceleration costs. MAG "decided to do something different with our state dollars," he said.

Board member Si Schorr said he wanted to postpone the vote until the Attorney General's Office can give the board options of allocating the money, practical implications for their choices and the Legislature's intent.

Zubia said he wanted the opinion to come soon: "The longer we wait, the longer we're going to delay that widening."

Once the three cities, MAG and the Transportation Board come to an agreement, ADOT would need less than two weeks to process financial documents, Burdick said.

ADOT will take bids from contractors for about a month, and it'll take up to another month and a half before construction can begin.

"We were assuming we were going to start work sometime this year, assuming the agreements would be finalized," Burdick said. "This process is continuing to work, and you're looking at sometime next year for work to start, depending on what happens with the agreements."

Avondale City Councilman Ken Weise said he's confident the cities can work out a deal.

"Everyone's in a hurry to get this freeway widened. But it's not like construction is going to start tomorrow," Weise said. "Let's remember we're still moving this four years ahead of schedule."

Reach the reporter at (604) 444-6511 or jessica.coomes@arizonarepublic.com.